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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SAMSKARAS

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INTRODUCTION

Samskaras are the psychosomatic actions of Indians performed from birth to death. They not only connect the processes of mind and body, but also unite with nature. Many Indians still follow and perform Samskaras knowingly or unknowingly, but only a few do systematically with sincerity. Modern men may think that they are nothing but ceremonies, rites and rituals involving religious superstitions and beliefs. Materialistic men may regard them as expensive and useless. Secular men may even accuse that they are communal, sectarian and obscurantist practices. Even, a section of traditional and believing Indians have started thinking in that way, because of their frustration or total ignorance about Samskaras. Unfortunately, some learned orthodox followers and elders have also decided to keep aloof, instead of clearing the doubts raised in the minds of disillusioned youth, of course still performing their Samskaras without fail.

A 'ceremony' may be a set of rites established by custom and tradition, but often has a symbolic and inner meaning. A 'rite' may be a social, religious or socio-religious act leading to a ritual. A 'ritual' may be a system of rites or ceremonies conducted in the prescribed order. Samskaras are also such prescribed and ordered psychosomatic actions, but not irrational, compulsive behaviour patterns or stereotypes. Indian Samskaras are unique in that way differing from these modern concepts. Therefore, an attempt is made here to interpret and expound Samskaras in the modern psychological perspective.

PSYCHOLOGY, MIND AND BODY

The genesis and development of psychology as a science or rather as a subject can only be placed during the later half of the 19th century with the pioneering works of Johannes Muller (1801-1858), E. H. Weber (1795-1878), H. Helmholtz (1821-1894), G.T. Fechner (1801-1887), Wilhelm Wundt (1832-1920) and Francis

Galton (1822-1911). Wilhelm Wundt is the founder of the first psychological laboratory in 1879 at Leipzig. Thereafter, psychology has made a tremendous impact on every walk of life of modern men. Almost, in every field, psychological methods are used and abused for material gains. Although, psychology has traditionally been defined as the science dealing with mind and mental activities, no psychologist has ever given any satisfactory, agreed upon and precise definition of mind. With the diversified definitions about mind converging with the processes of perceiving, thinking, remembering and intelligence, they have also failed in their attempts to study the nature of mind and the relationship between mind and body.

Modern psychologists (almost all of them are westerners) trace the mind-body problem of psychology to Greek classical writers. Claiming Plato (428?-348? B.C. E.) as the first 'dualist', it is said that the mind and body are two separate substances with no interaction between them. According to Descarte's 'interactionist' view anything that influences the mind is reflected by a parallel influence in body and vice versa which is known as 'psycho-physical parallelism'. The Gestalt psychologists based on 'isomorphism' hold that there is a point-for-point correspondence between conscious experience and the physical situation, but not an identity. Recently, psychologists have stopped giving importance to this vexed problem, turning their studies to the psychological individual, his responses and his mental processes! Thus, when other civilizations of both ancient and modern categories were struggling to find out the relation between mind and body, Samskaras were already in vogue to refine, condition and purify the psychosomatic processes.



THE MODERN WAY

The Performance of Sandhyavandana, which purifies one's nature, and the study of the Puranas, which show how great souls have led their lives, have become out of date. The man who performs Sandhya is looked on with pity and is put down for a useless relic of the foolish past. The real saint of the day is that man who keeps his dirt (Mala) inside, considering it to be the best imported fashion to be unwashed, and who puts on externally a neat-looking and imposing garment and also a better-appealing, smart and silent look of the borrowed type full of pity for all who are still in the low stage of Sat-Karmanushthanam. His pride at his own immense spirituality knows no bounds when his extraordinary merit becomes patent to him and to all on occasions like those when he is listened to with rapt attention for his sagely utterances. But soon the dizzy heights of his presumed spiritual elevation make him and his followers together reel with the giddiness of confusion and misconception, and the inevitable result is they all fall precipitately into deep sensuality and awful worldliness again. A careful observation of the present-day Hindu community will make anyone find out that, after all it is safe to follow only the old beaten track of our simple, but really great ancestors who have reached the highest Ideal by going along the right royal Sanatana Dharma-Marga, the prescribed way of Sat-Karmanushthanam.

- Sri Ramananda Saraswathi Swaminah.

ORIGIN, DEVELOPMENT AND CODIFICATION OF SAMSKARAS

Vedic hymns stand as proof for the origin of Samskaras, as every Samskara involves chanting of Vedic mantras, whose vibrations emanating from the person who recites, influence not only the reciter, but also the listeners and nature. This statement is based on ancient Indian literary evidences, later corroborated by other evidences. The number of samskaras have been enumerated from ten to fiftytwo and so on depending on various traditions. Earlier sources contain ten starting from Garbhadhana to Vivaha, as follows:

Manusmriti gives a list. In later lists, we find other Samskaras particularly that of death and yagnas being added. The ques-

tion as to whether a few Samskaras were increased to have elaborate rituals or many Samskaras were reduced to have definite and limited numbers suiting to the requirements of people is a debatable one. Generally, it is found that south Indian tradition contains elaborate ceremonies for death and cremation. Later, slowly, the north Indian tradition appears to have incorporated these into their Samskara list. Swami Dayananda Saraswati strongly refutes that rites like Dashogatra, Ekadashah, Dvadashah, Sapindikarma, monthly or the annual sraddha at Gaya mentioned in Garudapurana are not consistent with Vedic rituals¹. But, in South India, even in remote villages after death and cremation / burial, the 13th day or 16th day ceremonies are elaborately per-

formed irrespective of the caste affiliations. A popular list contains sixteen Samskaras as given below:

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|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. <i>Garbhadhana</i> | 2. <i>Pumsavana</i> |
| 3. <i>Simantonayana</i> | 4. <i>Jatakarma</i> |
| 5. <i>Namakarana</i> | 6. <i>Niskarma</i> |
| 7. <i>Annaprashna</i> | 8. <i>Chudakarana</i> |
| 9. <i>Karnavedha</i> | 10. <i>Upanayana</i> |
| 11. <i>Vedarambha</i> | 12. <i>Samavartana</i> |
| 13. <i>Vivaha</i> | 14. <i>Vanaprastha</i> |
| 15. <i>Sannyasa</i> | 16. <i>Antyesti</i> |

The number of Samskaras vary and increase depending on the various traditions. In the maximum, we find fiftytwo Samskaras with other elaborate rituals.

From the fiftytwo, it is evident that more importance is given to yagnas such as *Pancha Yagnas*, *Soma Yagnas*, etc. and connected rituals. Then slowly the importance is shifted to child-birth and marriage at one end, and last rites at the other end. Therefore, the Samskaras involving yagnas must have been more ancient ones than the others, though all incorporate Vedic hymns for procedural methods, if we consider that Vedic rituals are yagna-oriented. Then, the Samskaras involving child-birth and marriage must have been more ancient ones than others, if we consider that they are not yagna-oriented. In the ancient Tamil (*Sanga*) literature, we find many references to the introduction of *Karanams* (sacraments) in the society² and the performance of yagnas by the rulers³. Though the word 'Brahman' is not found, many other words and expressions have been used to denote them depending on the duties performed⁴. If the yagna-oriented Samskaras had spread to north from south, then, the his-

torical implications would be different. At present, the date of the 'Sangam Period' is traced back to 300 B.C. with the available archaeological, epigraphical and literary evidences, whereas the history of Sanskrit literature goes back to 3000 B.C., approximately⁵. But, in spite of this chronological puzzle, many parallels are found in the ancient Tamil literature, when compared with Sanskrit literature in the context of Samskaras⁶. Therefore, the development of Samskaras and the disappearance of yagna-oriented Samskaras may be an interesting study for research scholars. At present, among the popular lists of Samskaras 16 and 40 are generally followed by believers in some parts of India. Thus, as the Samskaras cover the life of man from conception to death, so also 'Development Psychology', a branch of psychology studies the development of the human being from conception to death tracing the changes in the behaviour and in the mental processes. Hereditary and environmental factors play an important role in such a study, taking biochemical, biophysical, physiological, psychological and social levels of development into account. Exactly, Samskaras take these into account in the development of man in all psychosomatic processes.

SAMSKARAS EXPLAINED WITH MODERN CONCEPT

Garbhadhana: The ceremony of impregnation instils ethical confidence in the minds of married couples to have sex and reproduce properly. In the individual consciousness, depending upon psychosomatic urges, they should be in a preparedness, mentally and physically, to satisfy the needs of the above obligations.

Modern psychologists assert that 'Development Psychology' starts from the conception and the list of Samskaras also puts Garbhadhana on top. Very minute details have been given as to why, when and how it should be performed for perfect impregnation to bear a perfect child at the right time.

The age for impregnation: Sushruta Samhita, verses 35:13 and 24-55 give the following details: The female should have attained sixteen years and male twenty-five of equal capacity and strength for impregnation. If not, the foetus would decay even in the womb of the mother. If the child is born, it would not survive long. Anyhow if it survives it would be weak in its body and limbs. Another sloka 35:29 says from the age of sixteen onwards all the tissues of the body grow and the stage of youth begins from the 25th year and it completes at 40th year. After that, semen tends towards depletion (sperm-count decreases). For women the limit is 48th year. Therefore, if the married couple mate between these limits (16 to 48 and 25 to 40), they have good conception. Though government propaganda continues through mass media by increasing the marriageable age of women from 16 to 18 to 21 now, doctors agree that successful fecundation starts from the age of 16!

The time of impregnation: Manusmriti gives very minute details about the timing of impregnation, so that good progeny can be produced. A woman starts conceiving before the 16th night of her menstruation. The first four nights from the day of menstruation are unfavourable and odious for the purpose of sexual function. Therefore, these four nights are prohibited (Manu: III-

45 to 50). Accordingly 6th, 8th, 10th, 15th and 16th nights are recommended for a male child and 5th, 7th, 9th and 15th nights for a female child.

Pumsavana: The ceremony of procreating a male or energetic child is performed in the second or third month from the date of conception. The couple should lead a calm and satisfied life, to have such intimate and committed relationship. The degree of the pregnant woman's psychic health is the most important factor, as conception is followed by a tremendous biological change in the female organism as a whole. She is prepared to have a child; to accept the feminine nature and to attain motherhood - these are the present-day conditions; but in Pumsavana, all these factors have been taken into account.

Simantonnayana: The ceremony of making the mind of a pregnant woman happy, includes the symbolic action of parting of hair by the husband to keep her psychologically and physically fit enough to bear the child. Elders and others brief her about the details of child development and easy delivery. The factors that have been found to have the most influence upon the foetus during prenatal development are food, maternal health and emotional experience of the mother. To be able to appreciate why these ceremonies are performed, the following details can be noted: Life begins at the time of conception. Fertilisation takes place within 12 to 36 hours after the successful conception. The period of the ovum is about ten days. The period of the embryo extends from the second week to the end of the second month. The period of the foetus extends

from the end of the second month to the time of birth. The growth of the foetus in a normal case is as follows:

Month	Height	Weight
2	2.5 cms	7 to 14 gms
3	9.0 cms	21 gms
5	25 cms	250 to 280 gms
8	43 cms	1.5 to 1.8 kgs
10	50 cms	2.6 to 2.8 kgs

The birth takes place approximately 270 days after conception. Therefore, it is evident that this period is specially taken care of to get the best result.

Jatakarma: The ceremony is performed at the time of birth of the child. To create confidence and make the mother mentally prepared to deliver the child, symbolised rituals are conducted.

Namakarana: The ceremony is performed on the 11th day leaving ten days from the day of birth or on the 101st day or on the very day of the birth of the child in the beginning of the second year. To give individual identity in relation with the father, family and society, a name is selected for the child with care. The significance of naming, having a name and exposition through such a name can be noted in every sphere of human life. Even today, we can see the fanfare and participation of family members and friends in the naming function.

Niskarma: It signifies the bringing of the child to a place of pure air and taking around, performed in the third lunar date of the third full moon fortnight from the date of birth or on the birth tithi in the fourth month. Here the possessive nature

of the mother, the growing instincts of the child and its coping with the environment are taken into account.

Annaprashna: The ceremony of giving solid or cereal food to the child in the sixth month is widely celebrated by all. The prescription of the food contains rice, corn, curd, honey and ghee. Here, each item has been meticulously taken to fulfil the biological needs of a six-month old baby. Even today, it may be noted that tinned baby food is sold in two categories one for the child upto six months and the other after six months, with the claims that it contains fats, carbohydrates, proteins, essential minerals, vitamins and so on, but with the important notice: "Breast milk is best for your baby. Give cereal food in addition to mother's milk"

Chudakarana: The ceremony of tonsure is generally performed before the end of the first year or third year in some cases. After 11 months the surface skin covering the skull becomes hard enough to have a shave and the grown hair in mat and lock is removed leaving the cardinal point for a tuft. Acupuncture experts and neurologists have proved that the point where the tuft is kept is an important one.

Karnavedha: This is the ceremony of piercing of the child's ears in the third or fifth year. The Yajurveda clearly explains the relation between the eyes, nose and ears with the other limbs of the body. By piercing these points, the body grows with full vigour and strength, and these points are also proven points according to acupuncture and neurological experts.

Upanayana: Though commonly understood as the ceremony of the 'Sacred

Thread', it is nothing but the initiation of the grown-up to Brahmacharya to have complete control over body and mind so that he / she is prepared for studies. **Upanayana**, which means 'to tell in person by calling near' signifies the advice of the teacher to the student to get initiated and prepare for studies with sincerity, devotion and commitment. **Brahmopadesa**, **samitadhana**, **vedavratas**, **astavratas** and other rituals follow to orient the mind of the students for best learning, understanding, remembering and application of the knowledge in the right direction for the welfare of the society, nation and universe as a whole. The relation between the external symbolism with internal psychic processes and development of human beings has been successfully utilised in these **samskaras**.

Vedaramba/Vidhyaramba: The **Upanayana** is the admission given for the disciplined student for studies, under a teacher (**guru**) in a residential form of school (**gurukula**). For Indians, the education of a child starts from the embryonic stage. Now, scientists prove that the first sense organs to be developed for functioning is the ear, but our ancestors knew this fact thousands of years back, a fact which can be appreciated from many examples. Particularly, at the time of pregnancy, as has been already explained, only good news, good actions and good results are told to the expectant mother; but they are also good for the developing child. Thus, from the womb to **gurukula**, the mother teaches her child in all possible ways. At the **gurukula**, all arts and sciences are taught so that the choice of specialisation is left to the taught without any compulsion or imposition. The psychological

basis of the ancient Indian education is understood by the salient feature of the **gurukula** system, in which all educational processes of teaching and learning, student-teacher relationship, educational techniques, etc. are taken care of⁷.

Samavartana: The ceremony of the student returning to home is more than the present-day convocation. This sacrament also marks the entering of the **brahmachari** into **grahasthashrama**. After a disciplined life he / she enters the household with good psyche and physique and is introduced to all the relatives. He / she is made to understand about **grahashramah**, its duties and of course marriage.

Vivaha: The sacrament is also known as **Panigraha**, **Kanyadan**, **Kalyan** and so on, and it is the most important among the **Samskaras** involving many rituals as it has a very great impact on the couple to be married, their parents, offspring and the society itself. Therefore, elaborate efforts are made to check the matching factors of age, family, social status, education, physique and psyche. Then the elaborate rituals create a strong impression on the minds of the marrying couple to lead a happy and prosperous life fulfilling all the duties of **grahasthashrama dharma**. After marriage, there are many household sacraments performed to create a cordial atmosphere for the newly entered bride, all other family members to have intimate relation with her and thereby instil confidence in her mind to perform all her duties along with her husband. In every sacrament of house-hold, psychological emphasis is given to have unbreakable relation, till the next ashrama of **vanaprastha** comes.

Vanaprastha: It is the sacrament of retirement from family life. After marriage, having children and bringing them up to marriageable age, providing necessary education, they have to arrange marriage for their boys / girls. Thus, after having grandchildren through them, they decide to retire from active family life, as they do not want to be a burden to the family. Therefore, to lead a spiritual life, they prepare themselves psychologically and physically for a retired life. Now, after retirement people may not be going to forests, but they are given farewell with compliments and wishes for a happy life.

Sannyasa: After renouncing family, to lead a peaceful life and pursue the spiritual path, initiation is done for sannyasa. The mind is conditioned through sacraments for death and the life after. Generally, no man wants to die or even to think about his death, when he leads a materialistic life, but, samskaras teach him to face death and of course die peacefully. The sacrament of psychological preparedness for death has no parallel anywhere in the world, as in our tradition and custom.

Antyeshti: The last rites conducted for the dead is known as antyeshti. Man is mortal, his body being subjected to decay, but the soul is eternal and immortal. According to his karma, he has to undertake his journey, till it is fulfilled. The rites make the performer to think about his forefathers and the dead on the occasion of samskaras with commitment.

It should be noted as to how and why the modern concepts of psychology should exactly tally with the underlying concepts of samskaras. How they have been developed and put into use by ordi-

nary men and women to follow and attain the best of the benefits some thousands of years back is also another important question. Definitely, much thought must have been given to formulate and codify such samskaras to be even followed by ordinary people. What the modern psychologists could not explain today, have already been explained and put into practice some thousands of years back, is really a great thing. Therefore, perhaps, it may not be exaggerating to draw the conclusion that ancient Indians could have codified such time-tested samskaras only because of their human and scientific development and advancement achieved perfectly consistent not only with each other, but also with nature. Just because, there are no material evidences, one cannot simply brush away this type of non-material and mental achievements⁸. The development of arts and sciences in ancient India is consistent with and corroborated by Vedic literature, whereas the modern development of such subjects can easily be questioned. When medicine was already developed in ancient Greece with so many inventions and discoveries, why should they take thousands of years to develop the subject of psychology? Even after the genesis and development of psychology, why should the psychologists debate inconclusively on the 'mind-body problems'? Modern psychological methods involve so many scientific experiments conducted in sophisticated laboratories. Based on the data collected after such experiments, hypotheses, theories and laws are propounded, expounded and formulated. In spite of all these scientific methods no two psychologists find the same solution for the same psychological

problem under similar circumstances. Then, how could the ancient Indians have invented samskaras without laboratories and scientific data?

Unfortunately, now Indians themselves look their samskaras down, their minds being misdirected by western education, neo-modernism and negationism. For some of the elite, it has become a fashion to condemn, criticise and even blaspheme the ancient Indian practices, but at the same time close their eyes to such practices by non-Hindu religious groups or even appreciate them. Let them understand the truth and tell the truth, instead of spreading canard. Now meditation and Yoga are practised throughout the world. Similarly, the samskaras can also be appreciated and practised to get proper benefits. When best results can be achieved with simplicity, there is no necessity for sophistry. Whatever is available on the earth is for everybody. Methods have been prescribed to share and enjoy such available benefits. Here, there is no exploitation of natural resources and ecological imbalances in the methods employed. Therefore, let humanity get all prosperity by understanding humanity and nature and act accordingly.

Notes and References

1. Swami Dayananda Saraswati "The Sanskara Vidhi", Arya Pratunidhi Sabha, New Delhi, 1976, pp. 342-43.
2. Tolkappiyam-porulathigaram-karpiya sutram - 143
"Poyyum vazhuvam tonriya pinnar
Iyer yattanar karanam enba"
- After the appearance of indiscipline
and immorality

Iyer introduced the sacrament, thus it is told.

3. Many references can be found in Tolkappiam, Pattuppattu, Ettuttogai etc.
4. Parppar, Arutozhilalar, Erivalrppor, Velviyalar, Merkulattor, Vedaparakar, Muttir.arabinar, Daruppaiyar, Aaynthor, Uyaranthor, Aravor, Andanar, Adi varunar, Maraiyavar, Murkulattor, Muppurinulor, Kamalattarinar, Munjiyar, Meyyar, Pusurar, Irupirappalar, VEDIYAR, Vipparar, Iyer, Tozhukular, Vedakko- diyar, Samittinar, Munivar, Sigaivar - the names clearly indicate the rituals, rites and duties performed for various samskaras. Though, how samskaras are performed and conducted is not dealt with in this paper, from the procedure of each samskara (sacrament), the fact can easily be understood.
5. With the internal evidences, the date of Tolkappiyam can be placed before 2000 B.C.E without importing Aryan - Dravidian race theories.
6. In Tamilnadu, from birth to death many rituals are performed even today. Except yagnas and Vedic chantings, all sacraments are followed strictly, even among the 'rationalist' categories. E. Thurston gives many illustrations in his work "Castes and Tribes of Southern India".
7. The following books may be referred to appreciate the "Educational Psychology" of the ancient Indians:
Radha Kumud Mukherjee, Education in Ancient India, Macmillan & Co., London, 1947.

Educational Psychology of the Ancient Hindus" by Dr. Debendra Chandra Das Gupta, University of Calcutta, 1949.

T.S. Avinasilingam, *Educational Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*, Sri Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya, Coimbatore, 1974, etc.

8. The following books indeed give many evidences for such scientific advancements:

Dr. Girindranath Mukhopadhyaya *The Surgical Instruments of the Hindus*, Calcutta University Press, 1913.

William D. Whitney, *Hindu and Chinese Systems of Asterisms*,

Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. VIII, 1864.

John Playfair, *Remarks on the Astronomy of the Brahmins*, Transactions of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, 1789.

The last book gives the details about the scrolls, charts, tables and other palm-leaves containing Indian scientific works meticulously taken away by the European Missionaries and other interested scholars to European and other countries.

Disease is a Projection of Selfishness

C.G. Jung, one of the best known of modern psychologists, has made a splendid attempt in his *Secret of the Golden Flower*, to bring to Western psychology this wisdom of the East. He speaks of a life, "which, if lived with complete devotion, brings an intuition of the self, the individual being". As to the trend of irreligious feeling, he writes:

"We indeed think we can flatter ourselves at having already reached...heights of clarity because...phantoms of gods seem to have been left far behind. But the things we have outgrown are only the word-ghosts, not the psychic facts which were responsible for the birth of the gods.

"The gods have become diseases; not Zeus, but the solar plexus, now rules Olympus... It is not a matter of unconcern whether one calls something a "mania" or a "god" To serve a mania is detestable and undignified, but to serve a god is full of meaning, and rich in possibilities, because it means yielding to a higher, invisible, and spiritual being. The personification enables one to see the relative reality of the autonomous partial-system, which, in turn, makes its assimilation possible and depotentialises the forces of external life. When god is not recognised, selfish desires develop, and out of this selfishness comes illness"

-George S. Arundale

Source: *The Lotus Fire - A Study in Symbolic Yoga*.